



Conceptualising educational provision for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in England

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The full journal article is free online: Ott, E. and O'Higgins, A. (2019). Conceptualising educational provision for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in England. *Oxford Review of Education*.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03054985.2019.1607274>

There were 4,480 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) in care in England as of March 2018. While this number is small in comparison to other European countries, the figure has risen over 130% since 2013, and UASC account for the majority of the rise in children in care.

UASC arrive with specific histories that may affect their learning and care experience. These include an interrupted history of schooling, trauma, isolation through different language and culture, loss of family and peer relationships, strong co-ethnic peer relationships, and stressful life events on arrival including racism, discrimination, and uncertain legal status. Research has documented the high prevalence of mental health problems among UASC children in care compared to children in the general population, children in care, or refugee children living with their families. Despite significant adversity, many UASC appear resilient and have fewer behavioural and emotional problems than their peers in care; they also value education and have high aspirations.

This article presents the findings from a mapping exercise on education available to UASC in England including 12 semi-structured interviews with virtual school heads, teachers, social workers, and charity education providers; document analysis; a workshop at the Department of Education with key stakeholders; and summary statistics.

Call to Action

Policy and practice

- Acknowledge that UASC face particular challenges in education assessments
- Ensure that all UASC have a Unique Pupil Number (UPN) to track their education
- Work across organisations to lessen the institutional barriers in accessing, progressing, and remaining in education – including issues around access in Year 11 and ESOL in colleges
- Focus on ensuring that educational provision is flexible enough to meet the varied needs of these young people, including emotional, cultural, social, language, and educational needs
- Invest in the provision and quality of bespoke, mainstream, and English language provision until more conclusive evidence can be reached on the best pathways through education for UASC
- Examine the ways in which provision meets local and national goals, including integrating UASC into mainstream educational settings and into English society at large

Research

- Examine provision for those with pre-ESOL English and those with special educational needs
- Design more longitudinal, experimental, and quasi-experimental studies to examine impact

What did we do?

This study aimed to address two questions: 1) What educational provisions are UASC in England currently accessing? and 2) How does this provision meet their needs? The research was a scoping study with methods of data collection including semi-structured interviews with key informants, collation of documents on UASC educational policies and practices from publicly-available sources, and a request for administrative data from the English Department for Education (DfE).

What did we find out?

Only half of UASC in care for 12 or more months have a Unique Pupil Number to track their education

Of all UASC in care for 12 months or more on 31 March 2017 (n = 2,240), only 50% (n = 1,110) had a Unique Pupil Number (UPN). In our findings workshop, it was suggested that UPN is typically only generated by the LA when young people enter mainstream education providers (usually school) and that many UASC do not get UPNs because they attend bespoke providers or further education. This lack of systematic recording of UPN means that no data are held on the education of over 50% of UASC (of all ages) in care.

Types of educational provision fell into mainstream, English language, and bespoke provision

Provision could be a combination of more than one type and young people often moved between provision types. For UASC in care for 12+ months at the end of Key Stage 4 on 31 March 2017, the majority (51%) attended a mainstream academy school, 16% attended a further education sector institution, and 27% attended a community school, foundation school, or voluntary aided school.

Initial assessments play a key role, but their effectiveness is limited

A major finding to emerge from our interviews was that educational assessments play a key role in terms of understanding which type of educational provision UASC should receive, but traditional assessments have limitations. Practitioners thought it was important to get to know young people informally and to view assessment as a continuous process.

UASC have additional support needs to access education and remain in education

A theme across all assessment processes and services was that this population encountered multiple barriers to both accessing and remaining in education. Some of this discussion focussed on a 'deficit' of the young people such as language, prior education, cultural knowledge, emotional challenges, and behavioural challenges, while other aspects focussed on 'deficits' in the system such as admission spaces, administrative barriers, and missing days due to appointments with social care, health care, and the asylum system. We reworded some of the language used around emotional and behavioural challenges to reflect the problems identified by interviewees and in documents, including behaviours stemming from trauma, the uncertainty of asylum status, cultural differences, and peer influence. This identifies focus areas for policymakers and practitioners (e.g. seeking out mental health support for past trauma).

Further information

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- To find out more about Rees Centre research: <http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/rees-centre/our-research/unaccompanied-asylum-seeking-children-in-foster-care/>

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